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SUBJECT: ONE AND THE SAME? THE COMPLEX ETHNIC PICTURE OF YEZIDIS  
AND KURDS IN ARMENIA

REF: A) YEREVAN 1259 B) YEREVAN 723 C) YEREVAN 528 D) YEREVAN 274 E)

06 YEREVAN 1484 F) 06 YEREVAN 1424

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. (SBU) Self-identification as either Yezidi or Kurd largely depends on individual self-perceptions. While closely related, many Yezidis and Kurds in Armenia insist on being either/or. Almost all Yezidis and Kurds here observe the pagan, sun-worshipping Yezidi faith, and speak the same Kurdish dialect, but base their affinity with the Kurdish nation on different criteria. The small self-identified Kurdish minority views the idea of a future Greater Kurdistan as a home for all Kurds - with no reference to a Yezidi nation - while the much larger (in Armenia) Yezidi community sees Greater Kurdistan as a home base within which could be nested an autonomous Yezidi homeland. Their varying sympathies notwithstanding, neither minority appears to be actively involved in the armed struggles of their respective brethren in Turkey or Iraq. End summary.

¶2. (U) This is the second of a two-part series on Kurds/Yezidi in Armenia. These cables report findings from a month of recently completed fieldwork by Dr. Mark Yoffe, a George Washington University researcher participating in the IREX U.S. Embassy Policy Specialist Program. The first cable (ref A) provided details of the communities' socio-economic situation. This follow-up report details the complex question of Kurdish and Yezidi identity and affiliation in Armenia.

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WHAT MAKES A KURD A YEZIDI (OR NOT)?  
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¶3. (SBU) In his travel to 13 villages, mainly populated by Yezidis and some by Kurds, Yoffe found that self-identification is largely rooted in one's internal beliefs about ethnicity, although he often found that a given village as a whole tended toward either a Kurdish or Yezidi self-identity. These internal beliefs trump even the language both minorities share, which is the Kurdish dialect of Kurmanji, although Kurds write it in the Latin alphabet and Yezidis in Cyrillic. (Note: According to data collected by Yoffe, Yezidis currently number around 40,000 in Armenia, non-Muslim Kurds 1,500 and Muslim Kurds under 100. See ref A for more information. End note.)

¶4. (SBU) In his interviews with Yezidis of all stripes, from rural villagers to urban intellectuals, Yoffe found that animosity toward Muslim Kurds appears to be the driving force for those who self-identify as Yezidis. Like ethnic Armenians, Yezidis suffered persecution at the hands of Turks and Muslim Kurds during the 1915-era Anatolian massacres – persecution that is still vividly remembered. Indeed, Yoffe found Yezidi communities which took great pride in the several dozen Yezidi who fought alongside Armenians against Muslim Azerbaijanis during the Nagorno-Karabakh war. At least one community had a monument to its Yezidi NK-war dead.

¶5. (SBU) While most self-identifying Kurds in Armenia are not Muslim, and practice the Yezidi faith, they dismiss the idea of a Yezidi nation. The decreasing few who still identify themselves as Kurds largely base their ethnicity on their moral support of a Greater Kurdistan that will eventually house all ethnic Kurds. Unlike their Yezidi neighbors, the Kurds in Armenia pay no heed to the Muslim-Yezidi religious divide, and view Yezidis as ethnic Kurds who, like them, will eventually be Kurdish brethren in a hoped-for future Kurdistan.

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#### VARYING VIEWS ON GREATER KURDISTAN

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¶6. (SBU) In addition to the Yezidi-Muslim religious divide that they use to distinguish themselves from Kurds, Yezidis also differ from Kurds in their reasons for supporting (in the abstract) establishment of a Greater Kurdistan. Yezidis view the establishment of such a land as the natural precursor to creating a protected, autonomous homeland that Yezidis from all over can finally call home. This view is more parochial in comparison with the cosmopolitan Kurdish view in Armenia, which envisions a Greater Kurdistan as home to all ethnic Kurds, irrespective of any religious differences.

¶7. (SBU) Although both Yezidis and Kurds are highly conscious of their ethnicity, Kurdish intellectuals in Yerevan and Kurds in the

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countryside to exhibit greater ethnic pride than Yezidis, attuned as they are to Kurdish history and the sentiment of belonging to a larger Kurdish nation. Proud of their history and the possession of oil-rich lands in northern Iraq, Kurds in Armenia appear to be frustrated by the marginal peasant-like status that has been their lot in the modern era.

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#### KURDISH AND YEZIDI SYMPATHIES FOR ARMED STRUGGLES

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¶8. (SBU) Both Yezidis and non-Muslim Kurds are increasingly concerned about the plight of their "brothers and sisters" in Turkey and Iraq. Both minorities share great animosity against Turks, and all are conscious of the fact that Turkey's potential incursion route into northern Iraq first crosses largely Yezidi/Kurdish lands. Both minorities also think President Bush will not allow Turkey to mount a large-scale operation in northern Iraq. Yoffe said almost all villages he visited possess at least one satellite dish, and that most Yezidis/Kurds are up to date about recent developments in the region thanks to reception of Kurdish-language programs.

¶9. (SBU) In spite of these sympathies, Yoffe saw no evidence of Yezidis or Kurds actively participating in armed struggles in either Turkey or Iraq. He did hear anecdotal stories about a handful of Yezidis going abroad to enlist in the PKK cause in the mid-nineties.

Although both minorities acknowledge the legal presence of a PKK representation in Yerevan, and repetitive visits by PKK activists to some Yezidi and Kurdish villages, the extent of either minority's support appears to be more moral than material – not least because the overwhelming majority of members of each community are extremely poor, subsistence farmers or herders, with no resources to spare. There is a common strand of opinion that armed struggle for Kurdistan was the job of their Kurdish brethren in Iraq or Turkey. Armenian Kurds/Yezidi seem too occupied with their own struggles for subsistence to involve themselves in conflicts abroad. Of the two

groups, self-identified Kurds were far more likely than Yezidi to consider active cooperation - such as offering medical care or safe haven - with PKK representatives.

¶10. (SBU) Yoffe said that while the Kurdish tend to be coy about their support, it is known that the few Kurdish entities that exist in Armenia - a writer's union, a union of Kurdish intelligentsia, and a Kurdish national council - have also been approached by Kurdish nationalist emissaries in the past. Some of these intelligentsia have also traveled to Kurdish areas in Iraq and Turkey, and maintain contact with Kurdish leaders in both places. Yoffe suspects the goal of these visits is not so much to recruit foot soldiers for the current armed struggles as it is to cultivate sympathy and support for the eventual creation of a Greater Kurdistan which, if one listens to conspiracy theories, might potentially include Yezidi/Kurdish areas in Armenia.

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COMMENT  
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¶11. (SBU) Based on Yoffe's research, it appears that the Yezidi-Kurdish divide in Armenia is a fluid though largely inconsequential one. Both minorities - whether considered individually or as one and the same - share a common history that unites them. Yezidis and Kurds are dispossessed peoples who dream of their own homelands in a historically volatile region. While both groups at least morally support the creation of a Greater Kurdistan, their varying rationale, poverty, and lack of desire to get personally involved cast doubt on the likelihood that this support will ever become more consequential.

PENNINGTON